

ON THE RECORD

BY MATT DODGE

Charlie Miller is stepping down as CEO from one of Maine's largest law firms to focus on his practice and mentoring junior associates. Here's why.

Charlie Miller's journey to the corner office was not typical. After graduating from Colby College in 1969, Miller spent seven years as a school teacher, guidance counselor and debate coach at Lawrence High School in Fairfield.

It was in the latter role that Miller got his first taste of high-stakes arguing, spending 26 weekends out of the year at debate tournaments, including trips to state and national championships.

Miller's wife recognized his passion for debate, and offered to put him through law school to help parlay the hobby into a new career. Miller graduated from the University of Maine School of Law and joined Bernstein Shur in 1979, and became CEO 10 years ago.

This will be his last year at the helm. Miller is stepping down at the end of 2013, making way for Pat Scully to take the reins of Maine's second-largest law firm, while Miller focuses on the firm's real estate practice.

We asked Miller to reflect on his career. The following is an edited transcript.

Mainebiz: Why is a succession plan so important for the firm?

Charlie Miller: I've been CEO for 10 years and I started planning for my succession 10 years ago. In order to have success and continuity of management and leadership, you really have to take a great deal of care when crafting your succession plan. If you don't, you're not going to be able to maintain the glue that holds together a large number of pretty headstrong attorneys. The long period [between Miller's announcement last fall and Scully's takeover] was so that Pat and the firm could prepare for the leadership change.

M: How does diversity play into your succession plan?

CM: It's about identifying the next generation of leaders. I intentionally layered the board of

directors with shareholders in their 30s through 50s, elected a number of attorneys in their 30s and 40s to the compensation committee, and a lot of the attorneys running our practice groups are in their 30s and 40s. We tried very hard to cultivate leaders who will be prepared to take over in time.

I've also met with every attorney over 60 and worked out their retirement horizons so there will be continuity and a succession plan for each of them.

M: Why are you stepping down as CEO?

CM: I'll be 66 at the end of this year, and I believe that 10 years is as long as someone should be CEO. I'm not tired, but I want to stop being CEO while I still have my fastball and a large client base. I'll act as a firm emissary to a number of civic organizations, be involved in a lot of the firm's committees and also be doing what I really enjoy, which is mentoring junior associates.

M: What was one of the biggest challenges you faced as CEO?

CM: We do a lot of commercial real estate work, so when the market really tanked in 2009, '10 and '11, it was a huge challenge for our [real estate] practice group. We looked at other areas we could grow, and have become very active in the alternative energy and transmission areas. We worked with the energy and environmental practice groups and did a lot of work on alternative energy siting. That



PHOTO / TIM GREENWAY

Charlie Miller will turn over the reins as CEO of **Bernstein Shur** at year's end. He's been planning the transition for a decade to ensure continuity of leadership at the law firm.

really helped save the [real estate] practice group during the recessionary period.

We also brought in James Broder, who brought with him a national practice in subsidized housing, which was more recession-proof than normal commercial real estate and helped us weather those storms effectively.

M: Are there trends in real estate law that you'll be following as you return to practice full time?

CM: The big thing in the real estate market is that people are not becoming developers and investors as readily as they were before. You really have to have business acumen, understand the market and work with your lenders. The level of due diligence is much higher and spec building is virtually at a standstill. I don't think that's ever going to come back because there have been too many bubbles, too many losses, for that to occur again. **M**